

# Communicating the Value of Active, Healthy Lifestyles to Urban Students

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Major obstacles to educational effectiveness exist for many low-income students of color who attend urban public schools. Many obstacles appear to be correlated with low incidences of physical activity in children and adolescents. Three factors—immediate and continual success, a relevant curriculum, and trusting and caring relationships between students and teachers—appear essential to catching and holding the attention and interest of urban adolescents, opening possibilities for regular participation in an educational physical education environment.

Many students who live in urban areas struggle daily to survive and escape the poverty that constrains their opportunities and ability to envision a positive future. They confront numerous challenges that drain their energies and distract them from engaging in active, healthy lifestyles. Some students do not eat well, many serve as the primary caretakers for siblings, parents, and extended family, and large numbers change their place of residence frequently, interrupting their education, their friendship networks, and their lives. The 1996 United States Department of Education report, *Urban Schools: The Challenge of Location and Poverty*, confirmed that urban public schools enroll a much higher proportion of low-income students (30%) compared with 13% in suburban locations (Lippman, Burns, & MacArthur, 1996). In the United States, low-income urban students are more likely to be of African or Hispanic heritage and come to school with higher-than-average family instability, poor health, and limited English proficiency. When income and location are controlled, however, urban students still face unique educational challenges associated with student background (i.e., higher incidences of single-parent families and frequent school mobility), school experiences (i.e., difficulty hiring teachers, low teacher control over curriculum, inadequate classroom

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discipline, more frequent weapons possession, and higher incidences of student pregnancy), and student outcomes (i.e., lower school completion rates and poverty and unemployment of young adults). The report concluded that these factors constitute major obstacles to educational effectiveness for many low-income students of color who attend urban public schools (Lippman et al., 1996).

Many of these obstacles also appear to be correlated with the lack of physical activity in children and adolescents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). Despite compelling scientific evidence about the positive effects of physical activity, many children are still unwilling or unable to participate regularly in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. This is particularly true for females, persons of color, and those from low-income families. When these demographic characteristics are concurrent, the regularity of physical activity diminishes substantially (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1991, 1995).

It is becoming increasingly difficult to teach effectively and establish meaningful educational programs in many urban public schools (e.g., Bauer & Lynch, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Ennis, 1995, 1996). Communicating our message (or any educational message) requires high levels of teacher effectiveness, program relevance, and interpersonal skill. Although teacher certification standards are becoming more rigorous to address this challenge, we are simultaneously facing teacher shortages in almost every academic area, including physical education. This pressures school districts to hire uncertified teachers for a growing number of children. For example, administrators in the urban school district in which we conduct our research attempted to hire more than 1,300 new teachers for the current school year. By the first day of school, they were able to hire only 1,000, 57% of whom were not certified to teach in the subject area for which they were hired. Affluent suburban districts also were unable to find adequate numbers of certified teachers, suggesting that this phenomenon is not just a problem of low salaries and difficult teaching conditions.

Our research in urban schools has included a decade of study on the conditions and factors that appear to facilitate and constrain adolescents' access to quality physical education (e.g., Ennis, 1998; Ennis & Chen, 1995; Ennis, Cothran, Stockin, et al., 1997). We have described both highly competent and incompetent teachers, outstanding and deplorable programs, and caring teachers and those who say unconscionable words and behave in inexcusable ways, damaging students both physically and emotionally. Over the last few years we have used these data to design interventions to address negative situations and assist teachers in creating programs that are positive, equitable, and motivate students to participate in healthy physical activity (e.g., Ennis, 1999). The preliminary research results indicate that these programs are relatively successful in convincing our target population, primarily disruptive and disengaged African-American students, to participate in physical activity.

Three factors seem to catch and hold the attention and interest of urban adolescents, opening possibilities for regular participation in an educational physical education environment. First, many urban adolescents must experience immediate and continual success if they are to engage and persist in activity. Second, they must acknowledge that the physical activities provided are meaningful to them. Third, students need to trust their teachers and believe that they sincerely care about them. I will briefly describe each factor and discuss its role in the communication process within urban school programs.

### **Enhancing Student Success**

Many urban adolescents come to physical education with a history of failure, both in school and in physical education (Ennis et al., 1997; Franklin, 1998). They are often unwilling or unable to focus their attention and discipline themselves to acquire the foundational knowledge needed to learn academic content and positive social behaviors. Efforts to enhance student success require an understanding of students' current physical, cognitive, social, and emotional abilities and the ability to modify and sequence tasks. In addition to students' diverse needs and expectations associated with gender, ethnicity, and prior experiences, successful physical educators modify tasks and activities to accommodate wide ranges of fitness, skill, motivation, and interest. They construct lessons that are developmentally appropriate for as many students as possible. Successful high-school programs accommodate students who range in age from 14 to 21 and vary in ability from highly competent to extremely low skilled and unfit. Within the same class, teachers find students with personalities that span the continuum from dominant and aggressive to passive, cooperative, and disengaged, as well as students who love to move and those who hate to sweat.

Teaching these diverse students appropriately and effectively in groups of 25–40+, as typically required in urban schools, is a complex and difficult task. We have found that the success of new program implementations depends in part on two factors. First, teachers need to acknowledge that students who repeatedly fail in their classes rarely continue to respond compliantly and obediently. Second, teachers must receive intensive instruction about multiple ways to modify activities so that most, if not all, students can be successful (e.g., Graham, 1992). In fitness-based programs this instruction encourages teachers to relinquish control of prescriptive fitness objectives, permitting students to set and pursue personalized goals that are linked to their current ability levels (e.g., Corbin & Lindsey, 1997). In sport-based programs, teachers modify the rules, boundaries, equipment size and weight, and number of players, permitting novices to participate in modified drills and games consistent with their abilities (Siedentop, 1995). Although these changes appear obvious to those of us who have studied physical activity, our research team has been met with teacher disbelief, criticism, and anger. Conversely, teachers who are willing to try these "newfangled" techniques express amazement at the success they experience with their formerly disruptive and disengaged students. Students meet with immediate success on easy tasks, followed by frequent but intermittent success on more challenging ones. They are pleased with their accomplishments, perhaps for the first time, and enjoy the praise they receive from peers and adults. They become more willing to participate and listen to the message about active, healthy lifestyles.

### **Curriculum That Is Relevant and Meaningful to Urban Students**

Historically, within a multiactivity curriculum, many physical educators typically defined content as elite sport or activity that engages competent students while excluding others (Ennis et al., 1997). More recently curriculum designers have advocated goals of student decision making and responsibility, providing an opportunity to acquire knowledge, participate at appropriate difficulty levels, construct a personal understanding of the content, take responsibility for personal

actions, and facilitate the participation of others (Corbin & Lindsey, 1997; Graham, 1992; Hellison, 1995; Jewett, Bain, & Ennis, 1995; Martinek, 1997; Siedentop, 1994). These curricula utilize theories of situated learning within a social-constructivist framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The student in these curricula assumes a principal role in constructing learning situations that are "authentic or genuine and meaningful to them and hold significance for other community members" (Kirk & Macdonald, 1998, p. 380).

Students develop identities of active participants as they acquire skill and fitness necessary to move more effectively. Curricula focus on learning as an active, creative process situated within a context, such as a physical task, an outdoor experience, or a social or cultural activity. Consistent with urban adolescents' need for success, constructivists emphasize developmentally appropriate curricula that anticipate and plan for student differences. Learning is assumed to be multidimensional, suggesting that students can and do learn more than one thing at a time. Further, students learn both from the explicit content that is taught directly and from the implicit behaviors and actions modeled by the teacher and peers (Kirk & Macdonald, 1998).

Curricula structured within a constructivist theory of learning provide students with multiple opportunities to participate, take responsibility for personal and social actions, and facilitate the participation of others. Often this occurs within a personalized environment in which students set goals and monitor their own progress. They participate in individual and team activities consistent with their self-conceptualizations. For some African-American boys, for example, one sport (i.e., basketball) is part of their emerging cultural identity and a central focus of their lives both at school and at home (Harrison, 1995). Developing strength, endurance, and skillfulness in basketball is essential for establishing status and respect within the neighborhood and the school. In a constructivist physical education program, these boys might set personal and team goals associated with cardiovascular, muscular strength, and endurance gains, as well as improvement in particular basketball skills. Likewise, for many African-American girls the opportunity to dance, acquire new ways to move creatively, and learn about their own health and physical development and that of their children are of prime importance. The presentation of relevant curricula within an environment of shared teacher-student expectations can be the difference between bitter medicine and sweet success.

### **Creating Trusting and Caring Teacher-Student Relationships**

For many years, scholars and researchers have worked to increase teaching effectiveness and curricular relevance under the assumption that these two elements held the keys to student learning. Findings from our recent research (Ennis, 1998, 1999), consistent with that of others (e.g., Noddings, 1992; Schlosser, 1992) indicate, however, that a third set of factors associated with teacher-student interpersonal relationships is instrumental in persuading adolescents to put forth effort and participate in activities in which they have a history of failure. Extensive interviews with disruptive and disengaged students suggest that they are unwilling to learn when teachers remain aloof, fail to offer convincing rationales for policies or punishment, and refuse to spend time with students or express interest in their lives. Teacher efforts to modify instruction and curriculum without first gaining

student trust and respect are often met with student apathy, reluctance, or anger, thus diminishing the chances that teachers will be successful or persist (Ennis, 1995, 1996).

Conversely, teachers who work consistently to understand the experiences and home environment of their students are more likely to develop respect for them as individuals (Ennis, 1998; Schlosser, 1992). Efforts to understand the rationale for student behavior before assigning punishment and assist students with working through problems at home that constrain learning at school build bridges of trust that facilitate future interactions. Teachers who express concern for students, who care about their successes and their failures and who extend a helping hand and a second chance create bonds of sincerity and authenticity that in turn build student respect, trust, and mutual caring (Ennis, 1998; Noddings, 1992). These relationships empower both students and teachers, leading to shared expectations for success and providing avenues for teacher experimentation within a warm, understanding student environment (Ennis, 1998). Students are more willing to try a novel task, confident that they will not be embarrassed or ridiculed by the teacher or peers. Teachers, in turn, are more willing to attempt change, confident that students will put forth effort and provide an honest critique. There is now compelling evidence on curricular innovation and change to indicate that most innovative urban school programs are not successful until teachers develop trusting, caring relationships with their students.

## Conclusion

The strategies used to communicate our message to students require effective teaching, relevant curricula, and trusting and caring personal relationships. Master teachers with reasonable resources and administrative support can communicate this message effectively to diverse adolescents in urban public schools (Ennis, 1999). Yet the complexity of school environments in which large numbers of diverse students are taught by mostly average teachers with limited resources, support, and opportunities for training suggests that substantially enhancing student learning and participation in physical activity will be difficult, given the current structure of schools.

In *The Right to Learn*, Darling-Hammond (1997) provided a blueprint for "an agenda for change" in which professional teachers teach *all* children, diminishing the legacies of failure that follow many urban students throughout their educational experiences. According to Darling-Hammond, teachers require more extensive training, more meaningful licensing, and more thoughtful professional development. Curricula developed by school districts should provide teachers with more latitude to teach concepts in depth and to guide each child, establishing meaningful relationships between formal school knowledge and their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, schools need to become places where people care for one another. Messages about growth, health, and active lifestyles are more easily spoken and willingly heard when the dialogue is between those who have formed a trusting relationship. Restructuring schools and physical education programs to communicate these important messages has the potential to reach millions of adolescents during the most impressionable time of their lives and permit this growing urban population to benefit from active, healthy living.

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